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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN POLITICS #18: JOHN PAUL II AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

[1](#)1. (SBU) Following is #18 in our series on Dominican politics:

#### JOHN PAUL II AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The death of John Paul II has brought no great outpouring of grief in the Dominican Republic, although this is nominally a Catholic nation tied by special Concordat with the Vatican. Many major churches, including the National Cathedral, remained closed as the Pope was dying.

The principal event to remember the Pope was a mass presided by Cardinal Manuel de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez in the National Cathedral. Conspicuously absent from these events was Fernandez, who was represented by Vice President Rafael Alburquerque. Unlike past president Hipolito Mejia, a devout Catholic who attended the mass, Fernandez is not a practicing Catholic. He did declare three days of national mourning, with the Dominican flag to be flown at half-mast, he issued a public statement of condolence and signed the book at the Nuncio's residence. Hipolito Mejia had canceled political activities because of the illness of John Paul II and the rest of the opposition PRD suspended political activities subsequently for the 3 days of mourning. Dominicans will be represented in Rome by First Lady Margarita Cedenio de Fernandez, Secretary of Education Alejandrina German, and the Dominican Ambassador to the Holy See, Rafael Marion Landais.

Perhaps the most eloquent tribute to John Paul II was the full-page statement placed in at least one paper by House of Representatives President Alfredo Pacheco, who wrote of his defense of human rights and his ecumenical reach to those beyond the Catholic Church.

The events leading up to and immediately following the Pope's death were covered extensively by the local press. Many stories recalled the 3 visits that Pope John Paul II made to the Dominican Republic, most recently for Balaguer's 1992 celebration of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the Americas. That event was an extravaganza of waste, featuring the construction of a mammoth concrete "Columbus Lighthouse" in Santo Domingo, which has never functioned.

Papers have focused on the possibility that the next Pope could be from Latin America, going so far as to speculate about the prospects of Cardinal Manuel de Jesus Lopez Rodriguez, a vigorous 63-year old who has served more than 20 years in the position of "first prelate of the Americas." One paper listed Lopez Rodriguez first among twelve candidates, something sure to sell a few papers at home; however, this was just rooting for the home team. Although vigorous in health and outspoken on principles of morality, Lopez Rodriguez has shown little initiative in taking on individuals, officials, or the comfortably paternalistic Dominican political system. He has demonstrated no great intellectual or administrative ability and has often come across as pompous. For instance, after additional security measures were placed at the international airport last year, Lopez Rodriguez refused to remove his shoes or belt at the checkpoint, asserting, "Everyone knows who I am." As a moral leader he gave exactly the wrong signal to a society that should be sensitized to the need to support security measures.

Lopez Rodriguez has reacted to journalistic speculation about his chances for the papacy by commenting that these statements are only conjectures and that the Holy Spirit will guide the College of Cardinals in the choice. The Cardinal did point out that Latin America, with 500 million baptized, is the continent with the highest number of Catholics.

[1](#)2. (U) Drafted by Michael Meigs and Sheena Stevens.

[1](#)3. (U) This and other articles in the series can be consulted at our SIPR website, <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/santodomingo> along with extensive other material.

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